

Bronze Fennel — *Foeniculum vulgare* /Perennial

*excerpt from **Wild Flavors** by Didi Emmons*

When I was a kid, our family would drive to Vermont in winter to go skiing. Across from our rented house stood a rickety old country store. It featured a penny candy section that filled an entire room—root beer barrels, string licorice by the inch, squirrel nut zippers, candy dots on paper, Swedish fish, and a hundred other choices. My heart rate would ramp up, and I'd whiz through my dollar allowance in less than two minutes. Now that I'm (much) older, I get that same rush when I walk through Eva's garden, especially if I haven't been there in a while. I skip, pick, and nibble my way through the dozens of wild flavors, savoring the herbs in much the same way I did penny candy years ago. But it is Eva's bronze fennel that makes me feel like a kid in a candy shop: it is everywhere, I snack on it incessantly, it is surprisingly sweet (a little like Good & Plenty), and I never tire of it.

Unlike conventional fennel, bronze fennel is grown for its fronds and umbels alone; the bulb is so small that it's hard to find. But it pays to consolidate energy: these fronds are more tender than the conventional green fennel fronds, and they're intensely licorice-like!

Culinary Uses

Bronze fennel, sometimes known as sweet fennel, is one herb where the less

that's done to it, the better. Like thin-skinned herbs, the fennel fronds should not be cooked or they'll lose their flavor. Pureeing also kills the personality of this delicate green. It is best eaten in salads, torn into bite-size pieces and tossed with milder greens like mizuna, Bibb lettuce, mesclun mix, and perhaps herbs like chervil and basil, and weeds like chickweed and purslane. It is nice to have some lighter-colored greens to show off the fennel fronds. But stay far away from heavy creamy or cheesy dressings—the fronds will retain the dressing and turn into little wet mops. Better to use very little vinaigrette, such as a little olive oil and lemon juice, and to tear or chop the fronds into pieces.

Fennel fronds can be chopped into grain salads, especially with minced tomatoes and a cheese like feta. The fronds also work nicely as a bed for fish or shellfish. Try garnishing a creamy pasta or risotto dish with fennel fronds. Bill Braun, one of Eva's foodie farmers, sees chopped bronze fennel as a universal garnish. His favorite: fried eggs topped with goat cheese and chopped fennel fronds. He also mixes the chopped fronds with yogurt, strawberries, and granola. Eva lays the fronds as a purple veil over a platter of bright pink cured salmon for visual and flavor magic. Chef and restaurateur Jean-Georges Vongerichten makes bruschetta slathered with aioli and topped with crabmeat and fennel fronds.

At the end of the season the plant produces sweet yellow flower heads. Chefs clamor for these tiny flowers to garnish all kinds of seafood. And then there are the fresh green seeds, called fennel berries. These fresh

(not dried) seeds are otherworldly—sweet, meaty, and priceless. Use them in crackers, biscotti, breads, cookies, seafood stews, and even granola, to which they should be stirred in at the last ten minutes of baking. You can stir something as miniscule as fennel seed into granola as it cooks. You do need to pull it out of oven for a minute, but this is done routinely enough, like when nuts/seeds get added in Didi's Granola.

One small warning: the fennel fronds, once chewed and supposedly on their way down the hatch, often have a pesky way of drifting to your front teeth and staying put. If I ever meet you at the farm, you can expect that I'll greet you with some stragglers dangling from my front teeth.

Bronze Fennel Butter

This butter is especially fitting on panfried, roasted, or steamed fish. Some good choices include Arctic char, Pacific cod, skipjack tuna, and mahimahi.

Makes 6 to 8 servings

½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, softened

½ cup minced bronze fennel

2 teaspoons lemon juice

salt and freshly cracked pepper to taste

1. Combine the butter, bronze fennel, lemon juice, and salt and pepper in a bowl, and mix well with a spoon or your hand.
2. Transfer the butter compound to a long piece of parchment paper, waxed paper, or plastic wrap. Fold the paper or plastic over the butter, and then

use the back of long knife to press the mound of butter into the fold of the paper, forcing the butter evenly up and down the length of the paper in the shape of a log. Twist the two ends of the paper to enclose the butter log, and store it in the fridge until it has hardened (or the freezer if you're eating soon). Store in the fridge, where the butter will keep for a couple of weeks. I like to save leftover butter by slicing it into rounds and storing them in a ziplock bag in freezer, where they'll keep for up to 3 months.